

Pompeii: the novel, the fireworks and the films

Maria Wyke

What does Pompeii mean today? For us, Pompeii is an extraordinary tourist site near Naples, the remains of an ancient Italian city which was suddenly destroyed one August day in A.D. 79 by the eruption of the volcano Vesuvius. If we can afford the fare to get there, we grab the opportunity to scramble through a whole city of ruins, look at a vast collection of beautiful, broken objects and stare at the corpses of Pompeii's citizens frozen in the agonised gestures of people who were buried by hot ash and lava. But once inside the excavations at Pompeii, as we walk through the deserted streets and ruined buildings, we are often tempted to imagine what the city was like *before* and *during* the eruption, and to give to its dead bodies a more personal history. We want to bring 'the city of the dead' *back to life*.

There have been many vivid and exciting ways of conjuring up Pompeii's last days. In the nineteenth century, you could read a hugely popular novel about characters who lived and died in the city and see elaborate firework shows based round the story of Pompeii's destruction. In the twentieth century, you could watch the city's destruction from the safety of your seat in the cinema and, as late as the 1980s, even experience in the comfort of your own home an American television mini-series full of rich Pompeians coming to a very nasty end – an ancient equivalent, perhaps, of *Dynasty* or *Dallas*.

Tomb of vanity

The archaeological investigation which uncovered the city of Pompeii, its furnishings, and the skeletons of its citizens began in 1748. Already by the 1800s, the ruins of Pompeii had become a fashionable stop for tourists on a grand tour of Italy's classical sites. The uncovered fragments of the ancient city and the remains of its daily life (wine jars, broken dishes, burned bits of supper) fascinated its visitors and inspired them to reflect sadly on the appearance of 'time arrested in its tracks', 'life in the shadow of death', 'a tomb to the vanity of the world'. When excavators thought they had discovered the signs of a secret Christian community living in the city, visitors were also able to reflect on the destruction of Pompeii as a highly moral tale about wicked pagans punished by God for the persecution of his people.

One Englishman who visited the ruins of Pompeii in 1833, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, was so taken by what he saw that he immediately wrote a novel about the city in order, he said, to

fill the deserted streets again with people, to repair the ruins, reanimate the surviving bones, and wake 'the city of the dead'. In his novel *The last days of Pompeii*, Bulwer-Lytton brought the ruins to life by narrating a fictional love story set against the backdrop of the doomed city. Glaucus, an Athenian gentleman living in Pompeii, falls in love with the beautiful Greek girl Ione. Jealous of their love, the evil Egyptian priest Arbaces murders Ione's Christian brother and has Glaucus accused of the crime. When Vesuvius erupts, a blind flower-girl Nydia, hopelessly in love with Glaucus, rescues him from the lions in the arena and takes the lovers to an escaping ship. She then drowns herself and the lovers sail off to Athens where they convert to Christianity, marry and live happily ever after.

From pyrodrama to orgy

This 'Pompeian' love story was a great success, reaching huge numbers of educated readers all over Europe and America. By the late 1880s, the novel was adapted for performance as an elaborate firework spectacle or 'pyrodrama', and the recreation of Pompeii began to reach a less literate working-class audience who had never visited Italy and knew little about 'Classics'. The pyrodrama of Pompeii's last days was presented at vast outdoor locations (like the grounds of Alexandra Palace) on a huge elaborately designed stage with a cast of nearly 300 performers before an audience of up to 10,000 spectators. The story of the love-struck Pompeians was now told visually. Few words were spoken and the action was largely mimed to music and centred on spectacular events such as religious processions, confrontations with real lions, firework displays and bonfires to create the effect of the eruption of Vesuvius and the burning of the city, and the escape of the lovers on boats that sailed away on a real lake. Compared to visiting Pompeii or reading the 'Classics', the pyrodrama may have seemed the next best thing, maybe even better. It was a highly realistic *recreation* of the ancient world, an affordable pleasure, entertaining, educational and moral: after all the decadent Romans and the sinister Egyptians die, but the decent Christians survive.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the visual recreation of Pompeii was a perfect subject for the new art of film. Now audiences already familiar with the love-life of the 'Pompeians' Glaucus and Ione could move with the camera through accurate reconstructions of Pompeian houses and gardens. They could marvel at exotic costumes, sumptuous sets, and huge casts. They could enjoy the realism of sequences shot on the slopes of Vesuvius itself. Through the employment of well-known film stars and the use of close-ups of their facial expressions and gestures, cinema audiences could even identify with the point of view of the Pompeian hero and heroine. Films set in Pompeii were sold to their audiences through an appeal to the moral value of their story: the innocence of the Pompeian 'Christians' wins out over the decadence, cruelty and avarice of their pagan oppressors. But, of course, the violence and sexual antics of the ancient Pompeians could also sell the movie. A silent Italian version of the last days of Pompeii, released in the 1920s,

is full of spectacular displays of Christian suffering as well as naked women dancing at orgiastic banquets or painting their toenails in the Roman baths.

Depression with happy-ish ending

When, in the new era of sound films, Hollywood took on the task of bringing Pompeii back to life on the cinema screen, the ancient city gained a very up-to-date look. The classical world held a much weaker grip on the culture of America than of Europe. There was not the same degree of familiarity with or interest in far-off classical ruins. If Pompeii was to come to life for American audiences, its ancient citizens had to have the same sort of experiences and speak the same kind of dialogue as modern-day Americans. So when, in 1935, the Hollywood studio RKO produced a sound version of *The last days of Pompeii*, the ancient city gained a new fictional hero 'Marcus', whose life and death matches that of the rise and fall of Chicago gangsters in 1930s crime movies.

The film hero Marcus is a hard-working Pompeian blacksmith who becomes embittered when he cannot afford to pay for a doctor for his wife and child. When they die, he decides that only money matters, and takes up the more profitable if suspect professions of violent gladiator and secret trader in slaves. But at the moment when Vesuvius erupts, he learns the futility of materialistic values, renounces violence, and sacrifices his life to help his adoptive son and some runaway slaves escape the burning city and the pursuing Romans. As he dies, Marcus is rewarded with a ghostly visitation from Christ. This 'Pompeian' story was a comforting and escapist one for poor Americans who were suffering considerable hardships during the Depression of the 1930s. The rich are seen as unhappy criminals who are punished with death for their exploitative and violent treatment of the poor. The poor, meanwhile, manage to escape the collapse of the corrupt city and sail away to a new home and a brighter future.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Italy produced hundreds of cheap films set in antiquity to counter the domination of its cinemas by expensive American epics like *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus* or *Cleopatra*. Pompeii now became just an excuse, a faint backdrop for the comic-strip adventures of a hunky hero whose biceps were easily displayed through his skimpy tunic. The American bodybuilder Steve Reeves – less expensive to employ than a big Hollywood star – plays a Pompeian hero who fights off hordes of gladiators, lions, and even alligators, defeats a band of hooded villains reminiscent of the American racists the Ku-Klux-Klan, and rescues a pretty Christian girl from the arena and the eruption of Vesuvius. Audiences were invited to see the Yawning Jaws of the Flesh-ripping Alligator Death Pit! The Pillaging, Plundering Black-Hooded Death-Riders! The Martyred Christians Thrown to the Gaping Fangs of Crazy Lions! The Awesome Eruption of Mt. Vesuvius as it Avalanches Down into a Boiling Inferno!

Eruption of virtual reality

When, in 1984, an American television network broadcast a mini-series set in Pompeii it returned to the earlier story of the lovers Glaucus and Ione and to slightly more accurate reconstructions of the life and the buildings of the ancient city. But the commercial pressures remained to make the doomed Pompeians speak and act like modern-day Americans. The rich Pompeians behave like wealthy, materialistic Americans forever trying to keep up with their neighbours. Ancient religious worship takes on the look of modern, fanatical American cults. Pompeian gladiators are treated like modern sports heroes. And the story of the city's last days becomes a parable for the life of 1980s Californians awaiting the destruction that the San Andreas fault will bring them.

Nowadays archaeologists have largely rejected the notion that Pompeii was once full of devout Christians who managed to escape the city's punishment. It is therefore harder to look on the city as some kind of moral warning or parable for our 'degenerate' age. However, the desire to bring the ancient city back to life has not left us. We can listen to the lurid stories of the tourist guides, look at the pictures of reconstructed houses and 'real life Pompeians' on display in the souvenir shops that litter the streets around the site, or press the keyboard of a computer to simulate a peaceful walk through the 'original' buildings and gardens of the city. Soon, no doubt, we will even be able to experience Pompeii as 'virtual reality' and putting on our space-age helmets and goggles, we'll be able to find ourselves back in the past, experiencing both the delights of Pompeian daily life and the terrors of the sudden volcanic eruption.

Maria Wyke teaches at Reading University. She has special interests in human elegy and in the ancient world in modern film.